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Whispers of Constraint: Soft and Self-Censorship, Artistic Autonomy, and the Cvirka Monument Case in Lithuania

This article investigates the interplay of soft censorship and self-censorship in contemporary Lithuanian art, combining an autoethnographic study of three artistic interventions (2021–2023) centered around the Petras Cvirka Monument with anonymised interviews featuring prominent Lithuanian artists across diverse disciplines.¹ The research examines how institutional frameworks, societal narratives, and cultural norms influence artistic autonomy, revealing how external pressures and internalised constraints shape creative practices.

The Cvirka case serves as a focal point for understanding the challenges of negotiating public memory and institutional resistance in public art, illustrating systemic challenges around artistic autonomy in transitional democracies. By integrating findings from interviews, the study highlights how leading Lithuanian artists navigate similar dynamics in their work.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Nye's concept of soft power and Haraszti's notion of the "velvet prison," the study analyses how structural mechanisms and personal negotiation intersect to define creative freedom. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the complexities of artistic expression and its role in shaping cultural and public discourse.

Keywords: soft censorship, self-censorship, artistic autonomy, cultural policy, public memory, Petras Cvirka monument, Lithuania, soft power, velvet prison, artistic interventions, transitional democracies

Artistic freedom is often seen as a cornerstone of democracy, providing a platform for dissent, critique, and reflection on collective identity and public memory. However, in democratic societies, subtle constraints shape artistic

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Eglė Grėbliauskaitė. *Redemption*. 2024, low-density polyethylene waste, metal, 6 × 6 × 6 m.
Photograph by the author



expression. In Lithuania, these dynamics are especially evident in the negotiation of contested historical narratives, where public memory, cultural policy, and societal expectations intersect. This article examines soft censorship and self-censorship in contemporary Lithuanian art, using the Petras Cvirka monument as the primary case study, with anonymised interviews serving as supporting evidence. Artistic expression in Lithuania, especially in its transitional democratic context, grapples with dual pressures from state institutions and cultural norms, creating a complex landscape where autonomy and constraint coexist.² Soft censorship refers to how cultural policies and institutional practices indirectly restrict artistic expression. Miklós Haraszti's "velvet prison" framework, originally developed in the context of state socialism, explains how procedural and economic levers subtly shape the boundaries of permissible public art. This framework remains relevant in contemporary contexts such as Lithuania, where indirect mechanisms influence artistic autonomy. Building on this, Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" emphasizes how cultural values, disseminated through attraction and persuasion, shape societal expectations and indirectly define the boundaries within which artistic expression is perceived and practiced.³ Together, these frameworks provide a lens for analysing the Cvirka case, demonstrating how policy and culture intersect to shape creative practices in Lithuania.

Self-censorship captures the internalised dimension of these constraints, where artists adjust their work in anticipation of a backlash. Anticipatory

² Verdery (1996), 105; Haraszti (1987), 37–38; Freemuse (2020)..

³ Nye (1990), 120.

obedience represents a psychological negotiation that is influenced by external pressures, yet enacted through internal decisions. Self-censorship often arises when societal norms or institutional expectations create an atmosphere of preemptive compliance.⁴ These processes, albeit individualised, are shaped by cultural and institutional contexts that reinforce certain narratives while silencing dissent. This is particularly significant in Lithuania, where historical sensitivities and institutional hierarchies amplify the psychological dimensions of self-censorship.⁵ The Petras Cvirka monument—a Soviet-era statue in Vilnius created in 1959 by the sculptor Juozas Mikėnas and the architect Vladislovas Mikučianis—serves as a focal point for these dynamics.⁶ Petras Cvirka was a prominent Lithuanian writer who supported Soviet annexation during the 1940s. His role remains controversial, as he is both celebrated for his literary contributions and criticised for his political alignment with the Soviet ideology. Public monuments often act as *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, embodying not only historical narratives but also contemporary tensions surrounding their reinterpretation.⁷ As a tangible symbol of unresolved memory politics in Lithuania, the Cvirka monument illustrates how public memory intersects with artistic interpretation and institutional resistance. Artistic interventions into the monument encountered resistance from institutional frameworks, revealing how soft censorship operates in procedural forms through the actions of Vilnius Municipality's Events Department. Similar tensions have been observed across Eastern Europe, where contested symbols remain sites of cultural negotiation and political debate.⁸ The findings contribute to broader debates on the role of public art in democratic societies and the subtle mechanisms that shape creative autonomy.

⁴ Bar-Tal (2017), 37–65.

⁵ Jastramskis, Plepytė-Davidavičienė, Gečienė-Janulionė (2023); Generis Online (2024)..

⁶ Goštautaitė (2020), 9–19.

⁷ Nora (1989), 7–24.

⁸ Verdery (1999), 150–151; Forest, Johnson (2002), 524–547.

Methodology

This study explores artistic freedom in contemporary Lithuania through a qualitative, mixed-method approach, combining autoethnography and semi-structured interviews. Autoethnography provides deeply contextualised personal insights, while interviews offer broader collective perspectives, balancing reflective observations with shared patterns among Lithuanian artists.

Analytical autoethnography, as outlined by Anderson, positions the researcher as both participant and observer, enabling personal experiences to be analysed within broader societal frameworks.⁹ This method was applied through three artistic interventions conducted at the Petras Cvirka monument by Eglė Grėbliauskaitė's collaborations with Agnė Gintalaite and Andrius Seliuta von Rath, as well as a solo project. These interventions critically engaged with the monument's contested legacy while navigating procedural barriers imposed by institutional actors. Field notes, reflective narratives, and documentation of public interactions formed the basis of this analysis, capturing both structural constraints and the psychological impact of working in politically charged contexts.¹⁰ Semi-structured interviews provided complementary insights, capturing diverse perspectives from artists across disciplines such as visual art, literature, and performance. Participants were selected using targeted sampling to ensure diversity in gender and forms of artistic expression and engagement with politically sensitive themes.¹¹ Topics explored included institutional constraints, funding dependencies, anticipatory self-censorship, and strategies for maintaining creative autonomy. Open-ended questions such as "How do you navigate funding restrictions in your practice?" and "Have you ever modified a project due to anticipated criticism?" allowed participants to reflect on their experiences while addressing recurring themes.¹² The integration of autoethnography and interviews highlights the intersection

⁹ Anderson (2006), 373–395.

¹⁰ Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

¹¹ Guest (2013), 112–171.

¹² Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

of individual and collective experiences. While autoethnographic data captures the immediacy of navigating censorship, interviews provide a reflective dimension, contextualising these experiences within societal trends. Themes such as procedural ambiguity and public criticism—observed during the Cvirka interventions—were echoed in the interviews, reinforcing and expanding the findings.

Data were analysed thematically, guided by the “velvet prison” framework and the concept of anticipatory self-censorship, which examines psychological adjustments to external pressures.¹³ Thematic coding revealed recurring themes, including institutional barriers, societal expectations, and creative strategies, highlighting the intersection of structural and psychological constraints in shaping artistic autonomy.

Ethical principles were prioritised throughout the research. Interviews were anonymised. Reflexivity was integral to the autoethnographic process, ensuring critical consideration of the researcher’s dual role as both an artist and an analyst during data collection and interpretation.¹⁴

Findings

The three artistic interventions at the Cvirka monument highlight how institutional mechanisms and societal narratives restrict artistic autonomy, offering concrete examples of soft censorship.

The 2021 artistic installation, *Let’s Not Forget Not to Remember*¹⁵, co-created by the author of the article and the artist Agnė Gintalaitė, critiqued the sanitisation of Soviet history by covering the monument with artificial moss. Despite municipal approval, the installation was abruptly halted on its opening day due to shifting procedural justifications, such as the absence of a formal letterhead and unspecified safety concerns. These justifications, compounded by public defamation labelling the installation as “hooliganism,” exemplify the “velvet prison,” where indirect control

¹³ Haraszti (1987), 37–38; Bar-Tal (2017) 38, 37–65.

¹⁴ Anderson (2006), 373–395.

¹⁵ Grėbliauskaitė, Gintalaitė (2021).



Eglė Grėbliauskaitė, Agnė Gintalaitė. *Let's Not Forget Not to Remember*. 2021, performance at the Petras Cvirka square in Vilnius. Photograph by Audrius Tuleikis

suppresses dissent while maintaining the appearance of neutrality.¹⁶ The unlawful actions of the Vilnius Municipality, later overturned in court, highlighted systemic flaws in public administration and accountability.

The 2022 intervention, *Testing Democracy Through Art*¹⁷, demanded institutional accountability, framing public apology as central to democratic governance. Using symbolic and performative elements, the artists critiqued the municipality's refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue. Internal correspondence revealed attempts to deflect blame, highlighting institutional resistance and the opacity of decision-making, which created barriers to public critique through art.

¹⁶ Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

¹⁷ Grėbliauskaitė, Gintalaitė (2022).

The 2023 project, *The Green Should Not Be Seen*¹⁸, built upon the themes of censorship and institutional control by incorporating the documentary film *5 Hours in the Square*¹⁹, co-created with Andrius Seliuta von Rath. This intervention chronicled the municipality's actions during the 2021 installation and aimed to reignite public debate. Although the project initially received approval, the documentary's screening was blocked by a last-minute demand for written GDPR consent from all identifiable individuals in the film—a requirement that overlooked the GDPR preamble, which balances the right to personal data protection with freedom of expression and information, particularly for journalistic, academic, artistic, and literary purposes.²⁰ Such legalistic barriers exemplify the strategic use of procedural tools to suppress contentious narratives under the guise of regulation.

Together, these cases demonstrate how soft censorship operates through procedural ambiguity, retroactive penalties, and public defamation. Institutional actors control the scope of permissible public art, stifling dissent while avoiding overt censorship.

Interviews with Lithuanian artists provided valuable perspectives on navigating the constraints of soft censorship and self-censorship in Lithuania's cultural landscape. A recurring theme was the role of institutional funding mechanisms as subtle tools of control. Artists observed how funding structures often prioritize "safe" projects, subtly steering creative decisions. As one participant noted, "It's not direct censorship; it's more subtle. You know what gets funded, and you shape your proposals accordingly."²¹ This dynamic reflects how systemic incentives and disincentives subtly constrain creative practices.²² Anticipatory self-censorship emerged as another pervasive issue. Artists described modifying their work to preempt potential backlash. One interviewee explained,

¹⁸ Grėbliauskaitė (2023).

¹⁹ Grėbliauskaitė, Seliuta von Rath (2023).

²⁰ General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Recital 153, Regulation (EU) 2016/679, 2016.

²¹ Anonymous (2024), Interview with a Lithuanian artist.

²² Haraszti (1987), 37–38.



“You start second-guessing your ideas, not because anyone tells you to, but because you’ve learned what won’t be accepted.” A filmmaker recounted abandoning a politically sensitive project, stating, “It’s not worth defending something you know won’t be supported. Sometimes, you just let it go before it even starts.” These accounts illustrate anticipatory obedience, whereby external pressures are internalised, limiting creative possibilities.

Societal norms also compounded these constraints. Respondents highlighted how audience expectations often dictated what was deemed acceptable, especially in Lithuania’s smaller cultural context. One artist remarked, “The audience can be as restrictive as the institutions. Certain topics provoke strong reactions, and sometimes it’s easier to avoid them entirely.”²³ This dual pressure from institutions and societal expectations created a layered environment of constraint, narrowing the scope of artistic expression.

Despite these challenges, Lithuanian artists demonstrated significant resilience and adaptability. Many employed strategies such as metaphor and symbolism to navigate contentious themes. One painter observed, “Symbolism gives you freedom. You can say what you need to without drawing too much attention to yourself.”²⁴ Others emphasised the importance of alternative funding sources and independent collectives as spaces for experimentation and risk-taking. A performance artist shared, “Working outside institutional systems creates room for ideas that might not survive in more controlled environments.”²⁵

Discussion

This study explores the dynamics of soft censorship, self-censorship, and artistic resilience in Lithuania, focusing on the Petras Cvirka monument interventions and interviews with Lithuanian artists. The findings demonstrate how institutional mechanisms, societal expectations, and individual agency intersect to shape artistic autonomy in politically charged

²³ Anonymous (2024), Interview with a Lithuanian artist.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

environments. These insights are situated within broader theoretical frameworks, highlighting the implications for cultural memory, governance, and the resilience of artistic practices in transitional democracies.

The “velvet prison” framework, as exemplified by the Cvirka interventions, demonstrates how seemingly neutral regulations subtly impose constraints. For instance, procedural barriers such as the abrupt cancellation of approved installations and the imposition of GDPR requirements on *5 Hours in the Square* illustrate how indirect mechanisms suppress contentious art without overt censorship. These strategies preserve institutional neutrality while curbing dissent, aligning with Haraszti’s notion of control exerted through administrative obstacles rather than direct prohibition.²⁶

The evolution of the “velvet prison” reveals the adaptability of soft censorship mechanisms across political systems. As Pascal Gielen suggests, democratic governance can create “indirect systems of control,” shaping artistic expression through funding dependencies and bureaucratic mechanisms instead of overt repression.²⁷ While Haraszti’s framework was grounded in state-controlled economies, Gielen’s perspective demonstrates how modern democracies foster subtler forms of control.

Anticipatory obedience—whereby external pressures are internalised—narrowed the scope of creative experimentation among Lithuanian artists, who modified their work to align with perceived funding expectations. This intersection of psychological dimensions and institutional mechanisms, as articulated by Bar-Tal, underscores the influence of societal norms and institutional pressures on self-censorship.²⁸ Transitional democracies such as Lithuania, where authoritarian legacies persist²⁹, amplify these dynamics, creating an environment where anticipatory obedience operates more acutely than in established democracies.

²⁶ Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

²⁷ Gielen (2013).

²⁸ Bar-Tal (2017), 37–65.

²⁹ Freire, Kats (2018), 16, 249–270.

Cultural Memory and Public Art as Contested Spaces

The Cvirka monument epitomises the contested nature of cultural memory in Lithuania, acting as a focal point for debates on historical erasure and reinterpretation. As Nora and Assmann suggest, public art serves as a repository for collective memory, where competing narratives are constructed and contested.³⁰ The intervention *Let's Not Forget Not to Remember* (2021), using artificial moss to critique historical sanitisation, symbolises the persistence of contested legacies and invokes Douglas' theory of purity and pollution.³¹ These findings resonate with trends in other post-socialist states, where public art oscillates between commemoration and erasure. The Cvirka case reflects broader regional challenges in negotiating memory politics, similar to debates over Soviet-era monuments in Hungary.³² While Nora's *lieux de mémoire* framework captures how such sites crystallise collective memory, the Cvirka case also highlights institutional reluctance to engage with contested histories, revealing discrepancies between public memory and institutional narratives.³³ Institutional Ambivalence: Support and Control

Cultural institutions play a paradoxical role as both enablers and restrictors of artistic freedom. While they provide platforms and funding, they also subtly steer creative practices towards politically or culturally "safe" projects. This dynamic reflects Haraszti's analysis of soft censorship, where institutional priorities shape the scope of permissible art without direct prohibitions.³⁴ This ambivalence was evident in both the Cvirka interventions and the interviews. Procedural hurdles, such as retroactive fines and ambiguous regulations, functioned as tools of suppression. Artists described how funding mechanisms implicitly discouraged controversial ideas, creating an environment where creative risk-taking is stifled. One participant explained, "Funding applications make you second-guess

³⁰ Nora (1989), 7–24; Assmann (2011), 78.

³¹ Douglas (1966), 35–40.

³² Turai (2009), 97–106.

³³ Verdery (1999), 151–152.

³⁴ Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

yourself. You're constantly thinking, 'Will this idea be too risky to get support?'"³⁵ These dynamics underscore the need for transparent cultural governance to ensure that funding structures foster, rather than inhibit, creative experimentation.³⁶ Artistic Resilience and Creative Adaptation

Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts" provides a valuable framework for understanding the subversive strategies employed by Lithuanian artists.³⁷ By embedding critique in metaphorical and ambiguous forms, artists navigate institutional constraints without direct confrontation. For example, the reconfiguration of the Cvirka interventions—adapting performances to bypass procedural barriers—demonstrates how subversive practices operate within or adjacent to dominant systems.³⁸ Independent platforms and collectives further exemplify this resilience, offering spaces where creative risks are encouraged. These strategies highlight art's enduring capacity to critique, adapt, and resist, even in constrained environments; however, cultural resistance often relies on subversive tools like metaphor and symbolism to critique dominant systems.³⁹

Implications and Future Research Directions

The findings raise critical questions about the role of democratic governance in fostering artistic freedom. While Lithuania's democratic institutions uphold freedom of expression in principle, procedural opacity and public defamation undermine these ideals in practice. For instance, the weaponisation of GDPR regulations in the Cvirka case demonstrates how governance mechanisms can suppress contentious work under the guise of compliance. Addressing these issues requires greater transparency in decision-making and clearer protection of artistic freedom, including exemptions for creative and journalistic work.⁴⁰ Policymakers could

³⁵ Anonymous (2024), Interview with a Lithuanian artist.

³⁶ European Cultural Foundation (2021).

³⁷ Scott (1990).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Scott (1990); Mouffe (2013), 1–7.

⁴⁰ Reitov (2018), 173–189.

consider establishing independent cultural funding bodies to minimise political interference and promote diversity in artistic expression. International collaborations, such as EU cultural initiatives, may also play a pivotal role in fostering artistic resilience and mitigating the effects of soft censorship.⁴¹ Future research could explore how similar dynamics of soft censorship and self-censorship manifest in other transitional democracies, such as Hungary, where state-controlled funding bodies prioritise politically aligned projects.⁴² Additionally, the role of digital platforms in circumventing traditional barriers warrants further investigation. Social media, crowdfunding, and decentralised networks offer new avenues for creative expression, especially in environments with limited institutional support.⁴³ Finally, exploring the long-term psychological impacts of anticipatory self-censorship on artists could provide deeper insights into how these dynamics shape cultural landscapes over time.

Conclusions

This study unveils the intricate dynamics of soft censorship, self-censorship, and artistic resilience in Lithuania, with a focus on the Cvirka monument interventions. The findings illustrate how indirect institutional mechanisms and societal expectations shape artistic practices. Psychological adaptation also plays a significant role in these politically charged contexts. By critically engaging with de-Sovietisation, memory politics, and governance, the research underscores the complexities of negotiating artistic freedom in transitional democracies.

The interplay between institutional control and self-censorship emerged as a central theme, reflecting how artistic expression is both enabled and constrained. The procedural barriers, shifting regulations, and funding priorities observed in the Cvirka interventions align with broader theories of soft censorship.⁴⁴ The anticipatory adjustments described by

⁴¹ European Cultural Foundation (2021).

⁴² Artistic Freedom Initiative (2022).

⁴³ Freshmind Magazine (2023).

⁴⁴ Haraszti (1987), 37–38.

the artists demonstrate anticipatory obedience⁴⁵, where external pressures are internalised, prompting artists to preemptively adapt their work to avoid potential restrictions. Despite these constraints, Lithuanian artists demonstrated significant resilience, employing strategies such as metaphor, ambiguity, and independent collaboration to navigate institutional and societal challenges. These findings enrich existing theories of artistic resistance, particularly Scott's "hidden transcripts"⁴⁶, by illustrating how subtle subversion can thrive within constrained environments.

The study also situates public art and cultural memory within the context of contested histories. The Cvirka monument, as a site of both erasure and reinterpretation, exemplifies how public spaces become arenas for negotiating collective memory.⁴⁷ This negotiation is particularly significant in post-Soviet Lithuania, where public art serves as a medium for addressing unresolved debates about identity, memory, and historical accountability. These interventions reflect unresolved debates about Lithuania's Soviet past and its implications for contemporary identity.⁴⁸ By examining the intersection of memory politics and artistic autonomy, the research contributes to broader discussions on how societies reconcile democratic values with historical complexities, particularly in post-socialist and transitional contexts.⁴⁹ While this study focuses on Lithuania, its findings offer valuable insights for understanding artistic freedom in other transitional democracies. The evolving mechanisms of soft censorship, such as bureaucratic control and anticipatory obedience, likely manifest in similar forms in contexts like Hungary⁵⁰ or Poland,⁵¹ where memory politics and state influence over cultural funding are significant. Future research could further explore these parallels, providing comparative perspectives that enrich the global discourse on cultural governance. Additionally,

⁴⁵ Snyder (2021).

⁴⁶ Scott (1990).

⁴⁷ Nora (1989), 7–24.

⁴⁸ Assmann (2011), 78.

⁴⁹ Verdery (1999), 151–152.

⁵⁰ Mérték Media Monitor (2016).

⁵¹ Artistic Freedom Initiative (2022).

investigating how digital platforms and decentralised networks enable artistic resistance, particularly in environments with limited institutional support, could reveal new dimensions of resilience.⁵² Understanding the psychological impacts of self-censorship, particularly anticipatory obedience, could further illuminate how artists navigate and internalise external constraints.

The intersections of governance, cultural memory, and artistic freedom present a fertile ground for ongoing inquiry. This study highlights the critical importance of fostering transparent and accountable cultural policies that support artistic autonomy while addressing historical and societal sensitivities. Policies that include independent cultural funding mechanisms and protection of artistic freedom in democratic frameworks could mitigate the subtle pressures of soft censorship.⁵³ By continuing to investigate these dynamics, scholars, policymakers, and artists can contribute to a more nuanced and equitable understanding of the role of art in democratic societies.

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⁵² Jenkins (2013), 50–75.

⁵³ European Cultural Foundation (2021).

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Šnabžtantys apribojimai: savicenzūra ir minkštoji cenzūra,
meno autonomija ir Petro Cvirkos paminklo atvejis Lietuvoje

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis yra Lietuvos mokslo tarybos finansuojamo postdoktorantūros tyrimo „Meno autonomijos institucinė priežiūra: menas ir Lietuvos kultūros politika“ (sutarties nr. S-PD-22-94) dalis. Remiantis Petro Cvirkos paminklo meninių intervencijų autoetnografinė analize ir anonimiais interviu su žinomais Lietuvos menininkais, straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip šiuolaikinį Lietuvos meną veikia minkštoji cenzūra ir savicenzūra, kaip instituciniai mechanizmai, visuomenės nuostatos ir kultūrinės normos formuoja meno autonomiją ir koks yra išorinio spaudimo ir vidinių apribojimų poveikis kūrybai.

Pasitelkus Josepho Nye „minkštosios galios“ ir Miklóso Haraszti „aksominio kalėjimo“ teorinius modelius, nagrinėjama, kaip struktūriniai mechanizmai ir asmeninės derybos apibrėžia kūrybos laisvės ribas. Tyrimas atskleidžia, kad menininkai (-ės), siekdami (-os) išlaikyti kūrybos laisvę, dažnai pasitelkia metaforas, simbolius ir kitas strategijas, leidžiančias apeiti institucinius barjerus ir išvengti viešosios nuomonės spaudimo. Cvirkos paminklo intervencijos išryškina ne tik subtilias kontrolės formas, bet ir menininkų reakcijas į iššūkius, susijusius su instituciniu pasipriešinimu ir viešosios atminties politika. Tyrimas prisideda prie diskusijų apie meninės autonomijos sudėtingumą, viešosios atminties politiką ir kultūros politikos vaidmenį postsovietinėse demokratijose; pabrėžia skaidrios, kūrybos laisvę palaikančios kultūros politikos svarbą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: minkštoji cenzūra, savicenzūra, meno autonomija, kultūros politika, viešoji atmintis, Petro Cvirkos paminklas, minkštoji galia (Joseph Nye), aksominis kalėjimas (Miklós Haraszti), meninės intervencijos, postsovietinės demokratijos